

2. Judith Miller spent three months in jail rather than reveal the sources of her stories on weapons of mass destruction. Would you be willing to take such a stand? Do you think news organizations should support journalists who do make such decisions?

CASE 2-E

DEATH AS CONTENT: SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

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Eric Steele's documentary *The Bridge* tells the story of the Golden Gate Bridge—the leading location for suicide in the world—and the people who travel from around the nation to end their lives there. The documentary also features interviews with the families of the deceased and a lone jumper who survived.

Steele's crew spent 365 days recording the bridge and documented 23 of the 24 suicides that occurred in 2004. According to Steele, he and his crew were often the first callers to the bridge patrol office to report jumpers, but they never stopped recording during incidents with potential jumpers and those that followed through. To accurately portray the number of suicides that take place annually at the bridge, Steele and his crew did not personally interfere with any of the jumpers.

In the United States, approximately 30,000 people kill themselves each year. The average age for a person who commits suicide by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge is in the 20s. Eleven men died building the structure. In an interview, Steele said he had once considered suicide. "It's that Humpty Dumpty moment when it's all going to fall apart," he said. "For me and many others, it didn't come. For the people in this film, it did" (Glionna, 2006).

Soon after Steele's crew wrapped up filming, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that multiple government officials claimed that Steele lied about the intentions of his documentary. When applying for a permit to film in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Steele said he planned to film the "powerful and spectacular interaction between the monument and nature." He later emailed bridge officials to confess the true intentions of his documentary, knowing there was little they could do.

Many critics lambasted the documentary, claiming that featuring the bridge as a prominent suicide destination in such a somber manner would only increase the number of suicides. It was called “voyeuristic,” “ghastly,” and “immoral” in various reviews and the equivalent of a “snuff film” by one San Francisco supervisor.

“This is like a newspaper carrying a front-page photo of someone blowing his head off; it’s irresponsible, exploitive,” said Mark Chaffee, president of Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network California.

Other detractors rebuked the film for failing to include interviews with any mental illness experts or psychologists. The review on the BBC website noted that “despite the shocking, up-close look, we’re no closer to a real understanding of the terrible urge to end it all” (Mattin, 2007).

The *New York Times* took a middle road, observing that *The Bridge* raises inevitable questions about the filmmaker’s motives and methods and whether he could have tried harder to save lives (Holden, 2006). It “raises age-old moral and aesthetic questions about the detachment from one’s surroundings that gazing through the camera’s lens tends to produce.” The author went on to say that such discussion was beyond the scope of a movie review.

However, just as many supporters came to the defense of the documentary, arguing that the film brought awareness to an important topic that is not discussed openly enough in society. Reviewer Jim Emerson (2006) wrote about the film for Roger Ebert’s website:

The Bridge is neither a well-intentioned humanitarian project, nor a voyeuristic snuff film. It succeeds because it is honest about exhibiting undeniable elements of both. It’s a profoundly affecting work of art that peers into an abyss that most of us are terrified to face.

Following the release of the film, the city of San Francisco voted to spend \$2 million on a study to examine building a pedestrian suicide barrier, a move it had resisted in the past (Glionna, 2006).

Micro Issues

1. Should the makers of the documentary have tried to intervene in any of the 20-plus suicides they witnessed? Why or why not? Justify your answer.
2. If a news crew had been on the bridge at the time of a jumper, would their obligations be any different from a documentarian?
3. Because suicide is a crime, did the filmmakers have a duty to report the jumpers as they climbed to the top of the bridge?

Midrange Issues

1. Does the recording of the last moments of nearly two dozen lives violate the privacy of individuals suffering from severe mental illness? The privacy of their families? If so, is this violation justified?
2. Does Steele's dishonesty in obtaining a permit to film the bridge and the jumpers negate the integrity of his documentary? Discuss your answer in light of utilitarian theory.
3. Is there any merit to complaints that the documentary might encourage "copycats" among those struggling with suicidal thoughts? Justify your answer.
4. Do you agree with the comments by Chaffee that the film is equivalent to a newspaper printing a photo of someone blowing his head off? In what way is the comparison right or wrong in your opinion?

Macro Issues

1. Is there a difference between how a utilitarian such as John Stuart Mill would view the decisions made by the documentarians and how they would be viewed by a deontologist such as Immanuel Kant? If so, discuss how they would differ.
2. Other documentarians have had to make decisions that allowed harm to come to their subjects or decisions to not render aid to their subjects in pursuit of a truthful outcome on film. What is the "greater good" in situations such as this? Is there a universal principle for all documentaries, or should it be decided on a case-by-case basis?
3. Many believe that the decision by the city to finance a study to examine ways to prevent future suicides was motivated by the film. Does this change your opinion of the film in any way? If so, how?

CASE 2-F

WHEN IS OBJECTIVE REPORTING IRRESPONSIBLE REPORTING?

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Amanda Laurens, a reporter for a local daily newspaper, covers the city mayor's office, where she attended a 4 p.m. press conference. The mayor, Ben Adams, read a statement accusing Evan Michaels, a city council member, of being a "paid liar" for the pesticide industry.